# World Chronicle

UNITED NATIONS

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**Human Resources Management**
**United Nations**

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## UNITED NATIONS REFORM

As the United Nations embarks on its biggest reforms ever, many discussions are taking place about the future of the Organization. "Reform must come from within the Organization," says Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources Management Rafiah Salim. In this interview, Ms. Salim discusses the modernization of personnel management at the UN and dispels a few myths about the nature and work of the Organization.

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**ANNOUNCER:** From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's World Chronicle.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle.**

As the United Nations prepares for the next millennium, great changes are taking place. The World Organization is actively pursuing new ways of managing and motivating its principal asset: its staff. Although personnel has been reduced considerably in recent years, the UN still employs nearly 8,000 people worldwide.

Our guest today has a long and distinguished career in human resources management prior to joining the United Nations. She is Rafiah Salim, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources Management.

Joining me to talk with Ms. Salim are Betsy Pisik of *The Washington Times* and Ian Williams of *The Nation*.

Ms. Salim welcome to **World Chronicle.**

**SALIM:** Thank you.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** We speak of 8,000 staff -- that's really very small. Yet the critics in Washington and elsewhere are often talking about the bloated bureaucracy -- the UN Secretariat staff being under-worked and overpaid and various other very insulting things about the Secretariat although a large number of a large percentage of the Secretariat are, in fact, American citizens. What's your reaction to this kind of constant harping on the alleged bloated bureaucracy.

**SALIM:** I believe this probably happened, again, because of lack of knowledge of what actually goes on inside the UN. To be honest, before I decided to join the UN or before I was offered the job, I had that perception as well because, again, this is the sort of common perception that goes around.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Did the stories go around in Asia, as well?

**SALIM:** Oh yes, oh yes, yes. So it was actually a pleasant surprise, where I'm concerned, when I came in to find that the total population is actually smaller than the number employed by one of the banks that I was working in in Malaysia.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Is that so?

**SALIM:** Yes, and this is an Organization that covers practically the whole world whereas the bank I was in was only operating in some -- a few countries -- around the world and it had nearly 11 thousand staff. So that comes as a complete surprise to me -- pleasant surprise as well -- because we would have been all fooled if I had come in and found

that the perception was a fact.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Boutros-Ghali proposed, before he left office as Secretary-General, a reduction on the staff of about a thousand and that's being confirmed by his successor Kofi Annan but there has been some criticisms of the fact that although a thousand jobs have been cut, the UN still has about 2500 consultants. Now, is this necessary to have all these people? I mean, okay you got 8,000 members of the staff but if on top of that you got 2500 consultants, that sort of change the picture of it, doesn't it?

**SALIM:** What I suppose, again, the public has to realize is the scope of activities the UN carries out is so varied and some of them are periodically – so it doesn't mean...

**LITTLEJOHNS:** The consultants are brought on a very short term basis.

**SALIM:** Yes, yes.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** The special expertise.

**SALIM:** That's right. You would need people to come on board off and on for specific area of activity. You don't want to employ these people full time because that particular function may not last any more than a couple of years, perhaps. Let us say, even taking the work I am doing now in terms of the reform, there may be certain part of the reform work, let's say if I were to do a cultural study of the UN, there is no way we would have the expertise from within to do a cultural study. I would probably need to get a consultant say, for three months or four months – that statistically would already appear as ...

**LITTLEJOHNS:** But it is also a very expensive way of doing things, isn't it? Because these people have to be paid per diem, they have to be brought here, and in Manhattan, where rents are so high, it's quite a problem for them, too.

**SALIM:** You see, it's expensive in the short term. It becomes more expensive if you actually have to employ people for a job that is going to last over a short period. You bring someone in, you employ, okay, you may say in the short term it's cheaper to employ them because you pay them the ordinary salary, but you have to remember, you have to cover them for also some medical coverage and ...

**LITTLEJOHNS:** All the fringe benefits ....

**SALIM:** Not only that, that means they will be years and years with us and if that job is finished and you need to terminate such cases, under whatever law in the world, you would have to compensate such people.

**PISIK:** Ms. Salim, I'm curious about these 2500 consultants – can you tell us a little bit, what kinds of work they do, what their expertise is and also what the average

length of their contract is? Are they here for a few months or are they here for a few years?

**SALIM:** It depends on the operation. Let's just say if you were to take something like demining, now ...

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Demining – you mean the landmines ...

**SALIM:** Yes. That job is going to last maybe a few years and before we are able to clear the whole world of landmines. So such people will be here for a long time. There would also be consultants that you probably just bring in for short period like on the task force that I have now on the human resource, they come every few months for two days and they go on. So, if you were to ask me for an average, it is very, very difficult for me to give, because it depends very much on the type of activity and the need for having them.

**PISIK:** Is there a line item budget for these consultants? Approximately, how much do you spend each year on these people?

**SALIM:** That could – for some of them, if they are planned, there would be a line budget. But for some of them, if they are not planned, it would just come. Suddenly you have a problem that erupts in the world somewhere and we need the expertise, then it may not be in the line budget. But most of the time, though, with consultants, except for the very few that is a long standing thing, it would be off line and it would come from donations and that sort of thing.

**PISIK:** But surely, there is a budget expense for consultants and short contract staff. The reason I'm asking is that, for example, these 8,000 jobs that we keep talking about and, more specifically, the thousand that were cut, this is work that's being taken up instead of by permanent people who are budgeted – within the budget – this is work that's being done by contract staff and short timers and we all know how much more expensive they are over the short run, at least. I'm trying to figure out what ....

**SALIM:** Well, I would say that Organization – no, what is assessed to Member States would only be the 8,000.

**PISIK:** Right.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** So where's the money for the other 2,500?

**SALIM:** It would come from donations from – it would still be from Member States, but it's not on assessment basis. So it could be voluntary contributions. It could be something that is very dear to certain government and they feel that they have a commitment to certain causes. So overall, if one were to include the extra-budgetary as of the end of the year, I would say, all in, we will be employing something like 14,000 people.

**PISIK:** And is that just here in New York?

**SALIM:** No, that's throughout the world.

**WILLIAMS:** You have been talking about the quantity of staff at some length, maybe we should go on to the quality because the former Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar famously was once asked how many people worked for the UN and he said about half. One of the problems over the years, it seems to be that most – management in the UN in particular – seem to behave with total impunity. Nobody has ever been dismissed for negligence or inefficiency it seems. One or two people recently have been dismissed for dishonesty and blunder but – for example, the security system that cost millions of dollars, nobody has ever been found responsible for this, let alone, held responsible.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** The security system which was not installed because it didn't work.

**WILLIAMS:** It was installed and then it didn't work and then they had to dis-install it and – but they paid for it. I mean, another case that I have dealt with, eight staff members have been suspended and then were reinstated after a year or two and the Secretary-General had actually said that the people who are responsible for this ...

**LITTLEJOHNS:** But these guys were cleared, were they not?

**WILLIAMS:** These guys were cleared, but the people who were responsible for bringing in the accusation and persecute them for two years were still held with total impunity. The Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, promised that these people would be – the people who have persecuted them over those years – would be held to account for it, and this never happened. How do you deal with people – can you track down negligence? Can you deal with it? Has anyone been ....

**SALIM:** Firstly, I would like to address your comment in terms of 50% of the population ...

**WILLIAMS:** No, not mine – that was Perez de Cuellar.

**SALIM:** Well, I beg to defer. I think that's a very, very general statement to make.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** I don't think he was serious about it.

**SALIM:** Let's put it like this, in every organization – whether you take Malaysian Government or the UK Government, or the American Government, surely in every organization, you take the best company in the world – there would always be a certain percentage of deadwood. I think – I'm sure you will be able to identify even from the organization that you come from that there are dead woods. This is something that exists. What is critical is to have a system installed where these people are developed – developed to be able to be productive. I think that is something that is ...

**WILLIAMS:** But what's been happening in the United Nations system is that when steps are taken against a staff member who is sort of grievously at fault, his Ambassador will come banging on the door and will be deferred to because governments interfere regularly in personnel matter here. Can you stop that happening.

**SALIM:** That is a very difficult aspect of managing United Nations – political interferences. You're right to say that. That is something I believe Member States, themselves, have to decide whether this should stop or this should not stop. It is impossible for people like me or any individuals as an individual or even as a small group in the United Nations to try and stop a practice that has been going on I think ever since the United Nations was born.

**WILLIAMS:** But shouldn't this come from the top? Shouldn't the Secretary-General on behalf of the Secretariat say that no ambassadorial representations on personnel matters will be entertained? Because this is a matter for our integrity and our human resources.

**SALIM:** No, let's put it like this ...

**LITTLEJOHNS:** That practice is a violation of the Charter.

**SALIM:** Yes. The Secretary-General may not have said it openly but I'm sure between you and I, both of us do not know whether the Secretary-General has privately, in a diplomatic manner, had said this. After all the United Nations is about diplomacy. So I'm sure the United Nations would use – the Secretary-General, in his wisdom would use every diplomatic channel possible to try and reduce as much of this as possible and I think this is also part of the reform that the SG is trying to bring out, i.e., to make sure that the managers in the UN are empowered and that they are able to be accountable and also to be able to stand up against unnecessary or unwelcome pressures.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** This is **World Chronicle.** Our guest is Rafiah Salim, Assistant Secretary-General for United Nations Human Resources Management.

**PISIK:** We are talking about pressure from the diplomatic community and I am wondering – are managers empowered to identify dead wood in their departments and how do they go about it? Are they training these people or getting rid of them?

**SALIM:** This is a new process that was introduced in the United Nations a year ago – the Performance Appraisal System. Now, again, with all Performance Appraisal System, you can check this with any organization – it is not perfected until after several years, but it is a very good start and one of the work that I have been brought in is to create or to retrain managers for them to be able to be effective – to be able to manage the staff who are performing below par. Now, mind you, in a diplomatic and political scenario that the United

Nations is, it is doubly difficult for any managers to pick up on his staff and tell him about his shortcoming and all that knowing that his embassy or his mission may not be too pleased about it. So, if it is difficult in any organization to install performance management culture, it becomes doubly difficult in the United Nations. But the Secretary-General and the members of the Cabinet of the United Nations is solidly for this System being installed. We are in a very, very new stage. We've only gone through a year and ...

**LITTLEJOHNS:** This is the Reform proposals that were made...

**SALIM:** Yes, the Reform, specifically the Performance Management System. So we need to give it time to mature. it doesn't happen in my former organization and all that -- the System -- you do not see the effectiveness of the System until about five years down the road.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Ms. Salim, what about the – go ahead please.

**WILLIAMS:** I want to broaden this question of human resources because there is also the question of the ethics of staff and the UN has an international staff – people brought from across the world which means their families are often brought with them and over the last few years, a lot of cases came to the notice of the press, of staff who have effectively abandoned their spouses, who are refusing to pay child maintenance.

**SALIM:** Yes.

**WILLIAMS:** I mean – I tried to interview one woman who couldn't come because she was collecting bottles for 5 cents each on the beach in Coney Island when I tried to arrange the meeting.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Is she the spouse of a UN official?

**WILLIAMS:** Yes, the spouse has been abandoned. I know that your predecessor took some strong action against some senior official – very senior officials -- who had balked on these payments. Do you think that your human resources actually includes the families and ex-families of spouse of UN staff who have been abandoned in this way and does it reflect upon the career of the person who is guilty of such ethical and legal misdemeanours?

**SALIM:** It should. Firstly, the OHRM is working – actually we have set up a Committee and we are working with some organizations looking at improving the UN's reaction to these cases. As of now, we are already actually giving information. Should lawyers apply or write in to us to find out or to get information, we would give information ...

**WILLIAMS:** This is a very recent innovation, isn't it?

**SALIM:** Well, it has happened – ever since I have been in here, we have done it, because we feel that legally, we are in a position to give this information. And we

have also the cases where we know who the spouses are. We have persuaded them to face up to their responsibility and they have acted positively in situations where we have acted or we have persuaded them. So I think we would continue doing that pending our study in terms of legally if there is anything more we can do besides cooperating with the authorities on these cases and persuading our own people to face up to their responsibility.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Ms. Salim, it's often said of the United Nations, particularly in Washington that the – I keep picking on Washington, but these criticisms often come from Washington – that the United Nations Secretariat Staff are grossly overpaid. On the other hand, we hear that nationals of some countries are reluctant to apply for jobs in the United Nations because they would be less well-compensated than they are in their own countries. Is the UN salary scale out of line, would you say?

**SALIM:** No, I have not done a thorough study of it, but with the very crude information – very raw information – that I have, I would say that at certain level, it is pretty competitive. But at certain level, it is not especially when we compare ...

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Is the top level competitive?

**SALIM:** The lower level is competitive. It is competitive.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** The top level is not.

**SALIM:** It is very difficult at the top level for us to get a very, very good people from around the world, because those who are excellent will not look at the payment that the UN is offering especially if you are talking about those from the developed countries. So this is a real problem actually.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** So you have a problem about recruitment for the field jobs as they become available now?

**SALIM:** At the professional level – at the higher level – there is some difficulty there. We can get the people, but it may not be from some of the right background that we want because of that.

**PISIK:** For many nations, it is an honour to have their people serve here and one of the things that we keep hearing about is topping of salaries where governments will supplement a UN salary. I wonder if you could clarify, first of all, what the UN position is on a home government compensating the salary of its nationals who are working for the UN and also if you can give us some examples of, perhaps, instances that you know of or that you have stopped. Because this is going on and it is, if not widespread, certainly ....

**SALIM:** Okay let's put it like this. The UN does not allow it in our Charter. We don't allow it. We have got people giving us information, so and so is being sponsored but

unless you give us evidence of it, we can't function. Surely the UN must be **the** body who can only act on hard evidence. I mean, this is the thing that disappoints me. People sometimes expects us to act on rumours.

**WILLIAMS:** But do you investigate? German newspapers, respectable German newspapers, recently carried stories saying that the two most senior German officials in the United Nations have received top payments of that kind ....

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Subsidies.

**WILLIAMS:** Are those stories investigated or do you wait for the German Government to confess.

**SALIM:** No, we are investigating this. One of those cases, actually the person has actually refunded the money before he even picked up the job. Yes, we were informed that he was offered, he took it but he refunded before he took up the UN post. The other one, we are investigating still. We do not have the details as yet.

**PISIK:** The same nationality or different?

**WILLIAMS:** He's German as well.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Ms. Salim, you've mentioned earlier on in the programme this task force that you have – outside people advising you on changes that might be made in the Secretariat – can you tell us a little bit more about that and how it's proceeding? Are these people – do they include management experts from private industry, for example, the Mackenzie Company?

**SALIM:** These people – we have actually people from the public sector, those who have put reform in their own governments. We got someone from the UK Civil Service who has been spearheading the reform in the UK Civil Service. We have someone from the Dutch Civil Service who have put through that reform, from Ghana who has also been working very actively. We also have ...

**LITTLEJOHNS:** And have you from the private sector?

**SALIM:** We've got someone from Symex.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** That's the Mexican cement ....

**SALIM:** Yes, the world's biggest cement outfit. We have Japanese ..

**LITTLEJOHNS:** But that Symex is part government isn't it? Or is it wholly private?

**SALIM:** It is wholly private, as far as I know, yes. I mean, the government may have some shares in it, you know. And we also have academician, a professor from Canada. We have a consultant – sort of semi-retired consultant from the US. We have people who have worked on consultating bodies like the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Japanese

Consultative Body. So we've got from various background, but they all have the experience of either directly putting through change management programme – human resource or management changes ....

**LITTLEJOHNS:** And who is paying for this? The United Nations? Or is it *pro bono*? Or is it being paid for by the governments?

**SALIM:** Most of them have been paid by their governments. What happen is, I identify the experts from all these people and after identifying them, I sort of approach the missions and said could you sponsor these people for I have no budget for them. So they have been very, very supportive of this reform programme.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** We have only a few seconds left but – is this programme working well? Is it revealing things that need to be done and making recommendations on how to do it?

**SALIM:** Yes. You know, their function is to advise us in the United Nations because I think reform of any organization must be done from within. So these people comes in to just help us, to guide us and to just suggest in terms of some ideas maybe we have not looked at to look at it and see whether it can be applied to United Nations or not. That is basically what their role is.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Ms. Salim, you've been a very interesting guest and thank you for your time. Unfortunately, that's all the time we have. Thanks for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle.** Our guest has been Rafiah Salim, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources Management of the United Nations. She was interviewed by Betsy Pisik of *The Washington Times* and Ian Williams of *The Nation*. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**